

## The taxonomic importance of two early paintings of the Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea* (Latham 1790)

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Received 17 May 2001

A fine painting of a male Pink-headed Duck *Rhodonessa caryophyllacea*, acquired by the Liverpool Museum, National Museums & Galleries on Merseyside (NMG) in 1998, seems to be the earliest depiction of this species from Bangladesh and Burma, which is now thought to be extinct (Fig. 1). The painting was executed between 1777 and 1782 by Bhawani Das, a Hindu miniaturist of the Moghul tradition and is entitled "Redhead" in Persian. It was commissioned by Lady Impey, the wife of Sir Elijah Impey, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court in Bengal, who was based in Calcutta between 1774 and 1782. The model for the painting was, in our opinion, alive and so closely observed that it must have been in captivity at the time. Lady Impey is known to have established, whilst in Calcutta, a considerable aviary and menagerie of native wildlife. Many of these species were painted, at her request, by some very talented local artists, who produced between them over 300 watercolours (Christies' 1998; Lugt 1938, 1953).<sup>1</sup>

Sir Elijah and his wife returned to England with the pictures in 1783, and some were used by the distinguished English ornithologist John Latham (1740-1837) as the basis for his type descriptions of several Indian and Asian birds new to science. After Sir Elijah's death in 1809, part of the Lady Impey collection was sold at Phillips in London (in May 1810, see footnote). At some stage, possibly at this sale, about twenty of the Impey paintings were purchased by the 13th Earl of Derby, of Knowsley Hall, near Liverpool. The Earl was a notable zoologist and friend of Latham's, and it was probably Latham who alerted him to the existence of these unique pictures. The four recently purchased by NMG were previously part of this Knowsley group.

In effect, the Impey paintings from which Latham described new species became the type specimens of the taxa that he named. As such, they are of enormous zoological, as well as artistic, importance. There must be many as yet unknown Latham types amongst the Impey paintings, particularly those that are now in private hands. Two of the Impey paintings recently purchased by NMG are undoubtedly types; of *Cuculus poliocephalus* Latham 1790, the "Grey-headed Cuckoo" and of

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<sup>1</sup>Footnote. The original Phillips catalogue of the first sale of items from the Impey Collection seems to be unobtainable, even in the libraries of Phillips itself, the British Library or the Victoria & Albert Museum. The total number which was arrived at by Christies' (1998), of 326 watercolours sold, has come from an unknown source. The only vaguely reliable figures of the size of the Impey Collection can be compiled from Lugt (1938, 1953), where he records in French the numbers of "Tableaux" (pictures) and "Dessins persans" and "Dessins chinois" (Persian and Chinese drawings) sold by members of the Impey family, which may (or may not) refer to zoological items commissioned by Lady Impey. These total 340 and are listed under sales in 1810 ("Sir Elijah Impey") and 1845 ("Miss Impey").

*Sitta longirostra* Latham 1790, the “Long-billed Nuthatch”. The watercolour of the Pink-headed Duck may have the same status.

The stance of the duck in the Impey picture immediately brought to mind a much cruder drawing of the Pink-headed Duck in Latham’s *General Synopsis of Birds* (1787, *Supplement* vol. 1, plate 119; opposite page 276. See Fig. 2). This illustration accompanied Latham’s account of the “Pink-headed D[uck]”, a name he formally



Figure 1.



Figure 2.

latinised three years later as *Anas caryophyllacea* (“the carnation-pink duck”) in *Index Ornithologicus* (1790, see Figs. 1 & 2). Although Latham did not specify in his type description that he was deriving his account from the Impey painting (he did, for instance, specify that Impey paintings were the basis of his accounts of *Cuculus poliocephalus* and *Sitta longirostra*), there seems little doubt that he had seen Bhawani Das’ artwork, even if he did not actually have it in front of him at the time.

The information that the Impey portrait and Latham’s comments gives us on the history of the Pink-headed Duck in captivity is extremely useful. There is little doubt that Bhawani Das was working from a living bird in good condition. Latham reported in *Synopsis* (1787) that the Pink-headed Duck “Is often kept tame” (information that he obtained from a Mr Middleton); in his type description in 1790 that it was “facile mansuescit” (easily tamed) (Fig. 3) and in 1824 that it “is often kept tame, and

becomes tolerably familiar". The Pink-headed Duck was also kept in captivity (during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) in England; at the Zoological Society of London in 1874, at Lilford Hall in 1882 and by Alfred Ezra at Foxwarren Park in Surrey, where it was photographed in the 1930s. Though birds lived for some years, they never bred. There are also records of captive Pink-headed Ducks at Clères in France, and one even reached Connecticut, U.S.A. (Fooks 1947, Delacour 1956, Ali 1960, Prestwich 1974, Kear 1990).

Although Latham (1824) mentioned that he had seen drawings of female Pink-headed Ducks, he unfortunately did not specify whether these drawings were also in the Impey collection. Latham himself never visited India, so he was entirely dependent on written descriptions, drawings and, in some cases, skins that were brought back by others. Working from such material can cause even the most careful ornithologist to be misled, sometimes in a cumulative fashion!

When describing the female, Latham (1824) mentioned a supposed difference in the shape of the wing coverts from those of the male; in both his preceding accounts he had referred to these coverts in the male as being curved downwards at the end. Latham's picture of the Pink-headed Duck in *Synopsis* (Fig. 2) draws particular attention to the wing coverts; he showed them as being large, darker than the rest of the plumage, and turning downwards. Plate 179 in his 1824 account, which is a version of the *Synopsis* illustration, emphasises these feathers even more. In reality, the feathers are not like this.

Latham's difficulty in depicting these feathers correctly seems to have originated with the Impey painting. This shows the wing coverts as much bigger and more

85.  
 caryophyl- A. fusco-badia, rostro capite colloque supremo caryophyllaceis, speculo  
 lacea. ferrugineo, pedibus cæruleis.  
 Pink-headed Duck, *Lath. Syn. Sup.* p. 276.  
**HABITAT** in *India*; per paria incedens; facile mansuescit.—21 pol-  
 lices longa.  
*Rostrum* elongatum, apice potius adunco: *caput et collum* ad medium  
 usque caryophyllaceum, *pennis* curtis: *irides* rubræ: *testrices* alarum  
 majores elongatæ, incurvatæ, ut in præcedente: *pedes* cæruleo-grisei.

Figure 3. Photograph of Latham's original type description of the Pink-headed Duck in *Index Ornithologicus*, 1790.

Translation of Latham's type description.

85. carnation-pink. *Anas* dark chestnut brown, with beak, head and top part of neck carnation-pink, speculum rust-red, and feet dark blue.

Pink-headed Duck of Latham's *Synopsis*, *Supplement* page 276.

Habitat India; occurring in pairs; easily tamed. – 21 inches long.

Beak elongated, with a rather hooked tip; head and upper half of the neck carnation-pink, with short feathers; irides red; greater wing coverts elongated and curved, as in the preceding account of the [male Western Duck or Garganey]; feet dark bluish-grey.

prominent than they actually are. However, they are also drawn much higher on the body than in Latham's version, and they are not curved downwards. Errol Fuller (pers. comm.) points out that Bhawani Das was unlikely to have had the anatomical skills that modern bird artists take for granted, and that the painting's great charm and importance has little to do with sophisticated drawing technique. We have no real idea about the intentions of Bhawani Das. Was he trying to produce an absolutely truthful image, or one that was merely decorative? Other feathers are also over-embellished; for example, the pink feathers on the head are painted in an attractive but inventive mosaic pattern.

On the evidence of Latham's drawings and description, it is likely that he had never handled a Pink-headed Duck dead or alive — nor observed its remarkable pink and chocolate plumage — but learned of it only from having seen Bhawani Das' painting.

Recent attempts to find the Pink-headed Duck in its traditional marshland haunts of north-east India have been unsuccessful. The last individual probably died at Foxwarren in England in the late 1930s (Kear 1990). There are good numbers of cabinet skins and mounts of the Pink-headed Duck in museums around the world, which Salim Ali attempted to list in 1960. He realised that his listings were incomplete and appealed for further information. To this end we hope to publish a more complete list of museum holdings of specimens of Pink-headed Duck (including the six which are in the Liverpool Museum) and would appreciate any information readers might have.

### Acknowledgements

We are most grateful to Malcolm Largen and Michael Walters for advice on nomenclature, to Errol Fuller and George McInnes for advice on plumage and to Lucy Wood and John Edmondson for help with translating Latham's original description of the Pink-headed Duck. Peter Olney kindly advised us on the Impey paintings.

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